

Rick's Tricks

Taking Off The Training Wheels

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In the development of every bridge player, one irony exists. The general principles of the game can be mastered in a matter of months (or sooner, if one timely absorbs a classic book such as Alfred Sheinwold's "Five Weeks to Winning Bridge"). However, once such principles are mastered, the rest of one's bridge lifetime is spent trying to figure out the maddening instances when exceptions arise.

The use of High Card Points (HCP) in valuing a hand is a prime tool used religiously by beginning and intermediate players. Beginners get the following drummed into memory: 12ish HCP for an opening bid, 26 combined HCP for a No Trump game, etc. However, three recent hands bid by seasoned, competent players show that visualizing the trick-taking ability of a hand differentiates an expert from the pack. These hands illustrate that HCP should be merely one tool in your tool kit.

HAND #1:

You are in 4th chair at all NV, holding:

♠Axxxxx ♥void ♦K10xxx ♣xx.

LHO	Pard	RHO	You
1♥	1♠	4♥	?

Your interesting hand has improved on the auction. A lot! How often does Pard overcall and you have 6-card support! Oh, but it is only 7 HCP, the pessimists cry out. So what! The opponents have at least 9 hearts and often more. You can likely score several ruffs in your hand. If Pard has either the A♦ or Q♦, your hand should take at least 7 tricks.

A seasoned player bid 4 spades, ending the auction. Pard had a cheesy overcall, also with only 7 HCP. However, Pard's cheese was aged to perfection:

♠K10xxx ♥109xx ♦Ax ♣xx

Predictably, the opponents lead a heart. If diamonds were 3-3, you would take all 13 tricks after the H lead. On this hand, diamonds broke 4-2, so you could only get 1 club pitch: 12 tricks. All this with 14 combined HCP! Your proper bid is 5♥. On this hand, Pard, lacking x-ray vision, would not go but many 1♠ overcalls would produce a cold small slam (or even a grand).

HAND #2:

1st seat, IMPs, at all NV

♠void ♥AQxxx ♦Kxx ♣9xxxx.

You reasonably pass (Those in Poland would open a Polish 2♥ but we Americans are quarantined).

Lefty passes and Pard opens 1♣. What to do? Like Hand #1, the auction has improved your mitt.

How do we convey the good news to Pard? I see several possible approaches. A fit bid jump to 2♥ is quite excellent (if fit bids by passed hands are not in your repertoire, make the change pronto. You'll love it). If you wish to emphasize your club fit and your lack of spades, you could bury your excellent heart suit and splinter with 3♠. Burying such an excellent heart suit would be a definite no-no at matchpoints, but, at least a couple key features of the hand are shown. An inverted 2♣ is a reasonable shot as to values, but most pairs do not make that bid when holding a 4 card major.

Where are the spades on this hand you might ask? "And, now the rest of the story", as Paul Harvey famously quipped: This seasoned player made the bid many would make: 1♥. Now, lefty comes to life with a jump to 2♠. Pard passes and righty bids 3♠. Irritating! You choose to bid 4♣, ending the auction.

Making 6. Pard held ♠xx ♥KJ ♦Axxx ♣A10xxx. Slam is cold if clubs are 2-1. You sadly look at your +170 score, reminding yourself that you only had 9 HCP.

HAND #3

You are in 2nd seat in an IMP game, all NV, holding:

♠98xx ♥KJxx ♦Qx ♣KJ9.

Have you noticed that each successive hand given has a greater number of HCP than the previous one?

RHO opens a weak 2♦. After two passes, Pard balances with double. You have a tough decision, made even tougher by the fact that the balancing doubler is entitled to "borrow" roughly a king from your hand when electing to enter the auction. A 3♦ bid would be ideal if not for the fact that it is a significant overbid IF played as a game force. That leaves four possible alternatives, all with pros and cons. Our seasoned player elects to bid 3♠. Pard likes your choice and cue bids 4♦.

You should sign off in 4♠ in a nano-second! Let us count the negatives for slam purposes:

Which feature of your purported spade suit is worse? quantity or quality?

The Q♦ is of dubious value

No Ace

Only 10 HCP opposite a balance.

For whatever reason, our hero bids 4♥, perhaps thinking that he could introduce an alternate strain. Pard thinks 4♥ is forward going and quickly you are declaring 6♠.

Dummy comes down with ♠AKJxx ♥Ax ♦x ♣A10xxx.

You catch a break at trick 2. After winning the opening diamond lead with the King, the 2♦ preemptor leads a stiff spade. Yumm! One huge hurdle cleared. You have to guess the Q♣ to bring this baby home. You reasonably play the non-preemptor for the lady. Wrong! Karma for getting to a poor slam? Probably.

HCP should never take the place of hand visualization. As your game improves, your mission is to picture likely hands for Pard to hold and visualize how the play might go before you make a committal decision. Didn't that Bergen fella say something about "Points Schmoints"? Smart dude!